15:Chaseling M-5 (ca. 1934-1936)1957
O117 Murngin O117

CHAPTER ONE

The Romance of Arnhem Land

WILD and remote Arnhem Land, in the far north of Australia, has long been the subject of popular rumour. Its notorious nomads met seventeenth-century European navigators at the spear-point, and stray adventurers have been clashing with them ever since. They developed a notoriety in raiding Macassar trading-proas and later Japanese fishing-luggers (though not without provocation) for the loot that was in them. Occasional prospectors, geologists, botanists, and adventurers kept to their luggers or, when venturing ashore, went fully armed.

I first heard of Arnhem Land in 1923 when the *Douglas Mawson* disappeared off the coastline. Fantastic rumours grew out of the disappearance of the ship, and it was alleged that survivors had landed in Arnhem Land, where the men had been killed and the women appropriated by Stone Age warriors. The tale was accepted and world-wide indignation was aroused.

But living with nomads soon dispels any suggestion that they have the ability to conceal news, particularly scandal. Here there are no secrets, for scheming old women persistently mutter the thoughts that are in their minds, setting the camp agog and breeding the prolific squabbles of bush life.

In 1933, clashes with Yulengor, the extermination of Japanese fishing-crews, the mysterious disappearance of beachcombers, and the spearing of an investigating trooper made Australia aware of the thousands of square miles of uncontrolled continent which was peopled only by Stone

15:Chaseling M-5 (ca. 1934-1936)1957
O117 Murngin O117

LANGUAGES, SIGNS AND SMOKE-SIGNALS

From Cape Wilberforce to Arnhem Bay the ruggedness of the coastline is exceeded only by the precipitous bluffs of the English Company's Islands near by, and the whole area is known as 'Bwartaba' or 'rocky country', 'wartaba' being the name for rocks. Cape Grey is a prominent headland in the Gulf of Carpentaria and is called 'Bokorral', 'bokor' referring to the cliff-face and also to the human forehead. 103 [133]

Names for birds are sound-perfect imitations of bird calls. A crow is known by the raucous 'warrk', and native-companions making a noise resembling a low-toned gargle are called 'gorral-kor'. The brown pheasant calls pleasantly on several clipped notes and is known as 'bukbuk'. 192

Pithy sayings are in common use, and the best known have English equivalents. 'Mata-rang' is a man who never wanders far from his horde territory, or, when infrequently visiting distant friends, is for ever anxious to return home; literally he is a stick-in-the-mud. The term is also given to an adolescent who finds his mother's company preferable to that of boys of his own age and who follows her when she hunts for food. 195

If a man comes into a friendly camp and wishes to pass on important news, he waits for a lull in the conversation, and remarks cryptically: 'When the tide goes out, have a look on the beach and you will find something.' His hearers are instantly alert and make an opportunity for him to tell his story. There seem to be trouble-makers in every camp, with their accusations, rumours, and quarrels, and in exasperation they may be told to 'Get out and camp by yourself till the wind cleans your hair'. [521] [578]

Stone Age man has an extensive sign-language or semiology, and I accumulated a vocabulary of over two hundred simple signs for common customs, names, questions, instructions, and relationships. Sign-terms are generally imitations of the subject referred to; when making the sign 201

15:Chaseling M-5 (ca. 1934-1936)1957
O117 Murngin O117

201 for a camp, a man raises his open palm and rests the side of his head on it, plainly suggesting a sleeping-place. Mosquitoes are suggested by stabbing a forefinger on parts of the anatomy, a shark is suggested by biting the forefinger, and to suggest a stingaree the same finger is swept down and forward from the mouth to imply the dangerous whipcord tail. A hand closed and held upright, with the extended forefinger waving inwards suggestively, refers to a man, and in the case of a boy, the same movement is followed by indicating his height. Rubbing the eyes with the fist signifies tears, and to say 'he is funny man' the signaller opens his mouth, nods his head and points to the humorist. Sucking the forefinger implies a fish; water is implied by tapping a bulge in the cheek. A stroke across the throat serves for a turtle, though the several varieties have further distinguishing signs.

Reference to the spearing of either men or game is by a casual flick of the right hand across the middle of the body. An ambush or stealthy night-raid is appropriately indicated by wiping the hand downwards over the face; death, or a corpse, by holding a hand in front of the face, with the fingers curved stiffly like claws. Hanging the fingers downwards from above the head serves for rain, and a clenched hand on the cheek means an egg.

Sentences are semaphored by a series of quick movements,
•[521] and I have known men to sit silently by a camp fire and converse for hours in sign language when the only sound was an occasional burst of laughter after the recounting of some episode. When returning to Yirrkala with nomads
202 in a canoe, they said there was trouble on the station and pointed to several men waving from the cliff-face. We were a mile from shore when one of the signallers took a piece of paper-bark and waved it so as to make his movements clearer. The crew read his message and told me that two local men had been ambushed and speared near Blue Mud Bay. Not